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ABSTRACT

It is argued that while college courses in French business communication aim to introduce business concepts, syllabuses and textbooks for this purpose do not integrate business skill training with business language training. Texts may contain extensive business-related vocabulary, readings, correspondence exercises, and definition of new concepts, but do not emphasize direct application to real business situations and therefore lack purpose. Introducing the business variable depends not only on appropriate materials but also on teacher background in business, and some homogeneity in student needs, motivation, and preparation for the course. Incorporating business-related projects into the French business course has been an effective technique for one professor. Small groups of students with varying language and business skills either research or "create" a small business, depending on course level, and prepare a dossier for class presentation. Parallel use of a textbook provides needed structure for the students. No direct language teaching is used, but all work and discussions are in French. Suggestions are made for preparing faculty and adjusting course content to a limited schedule. A classroom technique for teaching basic financial analysis skills is also offered. (MSE)

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BUSINESS FRENCH OR FRENCH BUSINESS?
WHAT DO WE TEACH AND WHAT DO WE CALL IT?

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Business French or French Business?
What do we teach and what do we call it?

While updating my vitae, listing classes I had taught, I had to go back to course catalogs to ascertain precisely what I had been teaching: I discovered that I had taught "French Business", "Business French", and "Commercial French". The variety of titles however did not necessarily reflect a variety of contents. I often inherited a specific syllabus and textbook for the course from a former instructor, and as a rule, syllabi and/or course descriptions placed the emphasis on the specialized language. The available textbooks illustrate a similar problem, offering a plethora of linguistic exercises, and often announcing their goal up front: to teach specialized language. I have used or seen Legoff, *French for Business*, Danillo, *Français commercial*, Mauger et Charon, *Le français commercial*, Fontenilles, *La vie des affaires*, Cummins, *Commercial French*. While some mention that they want to teach, or more frequently, "introduce" French business concepts, most focus on technical language: "*Le Français commercial est une méthode d'apprentissage de l'expression écrite et orale nécessaire à la vie professionnelle*" (Danillo, *Français commercial*) ("*Le Français commercial* is a method of learning written and oral expression necessary for professional life"). Legoff, Danillo, and Cummins note that either their main goal or one of the possible uses of their text is to prepare for the "Certificat Pratique" exam from the Paris Chamber of Commerce. Most recently, I learned of and looked through the McGraw-Hill series co-authored by Schmitt and Lutz, and whose recent publication date (1993) seemed promising: I

surveyed three titles: "Finance et comptabilité", "Economie et finance", and "Commerce et marketing". However, browsing through those texts, I was quickly disappointed, for they summarize what I have been trying to stay away from: (I quote) "The authors wish to stress that it is not the intent of the book to teach Finance or Accounting. The intent of the book is to teach the lexicon or vocabulary needed to discuss [these] fields" (Preface, "Finance et comptabilité"). At least, they're honest... These books, written in French (and also available in Spanish, with, I assume, the same content), discuss almost exclusively American concepts, the large majority of examples are of American companies, half or more of the figures are given in dollars, and one finds such disclaimers as "Le format du bilan d'une entreprise aux Etats-Unis (qui n'est pas toujours le cas en France) est le suivant:..." ("The format of the American balance-sheet --which is not always the case in France-- is as follows:..."). This is an extreme example, but all the more disheartening in that it is one of the most recent books (series) on the market. As a rule, although most textbooks try to liven up the material, they always offer long lists of vocabulary and numerous passive exercises. By "passive" I mean translations, fill in the blanks, multiple choice, etc. Most of them include dialogues, photocopies of "real" documents, and try to focus on the same characters or same firms from one chapter to the next, as a sort of "Business soap opera". In the end, while the student may pick up some anecdotal knowledge of how French people do business (how to write a letter, the fact that French people have 5 weeks of

paid vacations, etc), they rarely acquire any business skills -- merely business language skills diluted in some culturo-business context. In fact, none of the textbooks I have seen actively teach the student how to do business, aside from letter writing. Yet, what will a French major learning Business French language do with his/her newly acquired vocabulary if s/he has no business knowledge? I have yet to find a text introducing, explaining, and requiring the use of, for instance, accounting and financial analysis methods. While the students generally do improve their language skills, through readings, vocabulary expansion, letter writing, definition of new concepts, etc, the business aspect is almost systematically and unfortunately neglected. The result is a very dry course, with a lack of motivation, and lack of purpose.

It seems to me that teaching specialized language without direct application to business situations, and without implicating the students in a business context, will fail for lack of student motivation and purpose. To the question: "How can we keep the interest level up in a specialized language class?", the obvious answer is: by introducing the Business variable in the classroom. However, this is not as easy as it may seem. First of all, we need to educate the teachers: most of them, most of us, are still language teachers with no or insufficient business background, and usually no pedagogical skills on how to teach business. But that's not all. Assuming the teachers are well equipped, how do they teach, in one or two classes, and in addition to language: economics, marketing, management, accounting and finance topics

which, in solely a business context, are broken down in fifty or more courses? Or how do they choose which topics to treat and which to ignore?

An added difficulty is the nature of the students attending these classes. Invariably, there is a mix of students in this type of classes, and at times at two different levels. In one instance, I was teaching a class of about 15 students, half of whom wanted to take the "Certificat Pratique" exam at the end of the course, while the other half was not interested in this exam. The exam was offered through the university and advertised in conjunction with the course, therefore, the course had to prepare the students for the "Certificat Pratique". Given that translation and specialized vocabulary seem to be the main ingredients of the exam, it made for a very dry class, and everyone "benefited" from the emphasis on translation, whether they wanted or not. But more often than not, the mix simply consists of, on one hand, business students, who usually have a more limited linguistic knowledge, and, on the other hand, language majors who need another class and sign up for the business one, often not by real choice but by default. The latter usually are not very motivated in business, and feel that they don't have the necessary background for the course. In one case, a MA student in French did very well in the class, and received a grade of "A". However, he explained in his class evaluation that he felt he was not properly prepared for the course because he had no business background whatsoever. Another student who was taking her second "Business French" course, mentioned that she felt prepared precisely because of the prior Business course she had taken,

"otherwise [she] would have been lost". This in spite of the fact that I had built my course aware of the students' divergent backgrounds, and on the assumption that some of them had no business knowledge at all, be it French or American. We tackled a variety of business topics, some of them complex, but always starting from the basics. Nonetheless, the perception, the stigma remained, and the language majors felt at a disadvantage. It is very rare to find students who are genuinely interested in both the business and the language aspects at the same time --and one of the most difficult tasks for the instructor is to address the needs of all the students while keeping them all interested and motivated.

During my first year of teaching "French Business", I was using Legoff, which purpose is to prepare the students for the "Certificat Pratique" from the Paris Chamber of Commerce. I tried to motivate the students interest, by bringing as many "authentic" documents as possible in the classroom: business letters, advertisements, flyers from banks and the post office, videos from French TV, etc. But there was a definite lack of coordination and, in the end, a certain lack of purpose.

This year, I have tried to do things differently. Remembering the business classes I enjoyed the most while I was in college, I decided that business "projects" was the way to go. As a business student I worked on a variety of team projects (although the team was often limited to two students): each team focused on the financial analysis of a given firm (including meeting with executives of the firm, obtaining all financial and complementary

documents, analyzing the financial situation and making recommendations), on the marketing analysis of a product (contacts with and study of the various competitors, analysis of the advertising campaign and of distributing channels, etc), or on a small business creation (involving all aspects, from choice of a legal form, to accounting, marketing, etc). All these projects required the direct application of concepts and skills taught in at least one field (accounting, finance, marketing, strategic analysis, statistics), and often required the use of several. These are the courses I remember most vividly. All required contacts with the "real" business world: letters, meetings, research, interviews, etc. The purely theoretical courses never made such a vivid impression, although I used the knowledge acquired in them for the "project" courses.

I now incorporate "projects" in my French Business classes, although I have not completely given up on the parallel use of a textbook. I have found that the students still need the structure provided by a text. This year in 435 (2nd course in a series of 2), the students created small groups, mixing expertise (language/business) and each group was to present a full dossier at the end of the semester. The goal was to create (on paper at least) a small business (either in France, or one importing or exporting from/to France). At the end of the semester their full "dossier" would be what they would present to a French banker, trying to obtain funding for their firm. That part of the course did not involve any direct language teaching, although all discussions and work were done in French. Written feed-back involved grammar and vocabulary

corrections when needed and may have included suggestions for review. If one particular linguistic problem arose from most groups, then I would make a point of tackling it in class. The Danillo text was used for about half of the class time (and homework), providing general information about the French business world and specific linguistic material (vocabulary and grammar). As much as possible, I tried to relate Danillo to the project, choosing and changing the order in which the chapters were studied. At the end of the semester, each group made a presentation to the rest of the class (the other students and the prof played the role of the solicited bankers) and turned in a dossier. They all accomplished a lot, all made written contact with a French firm or institution and all had to apply concepts to a specific case of their choice. Their final dossiers were for the most part impressive. Yet several complained of a lack of organization and guidance. They didn't know exactly what was expected of them, which made them uneasy.

In French 335 (first course), I have the groups write to five French firms in a field of their choice at the very beginning of the semester (we start with chapter 21, the business letter), their final project being to make a report about one of them, including a brief history of the firm, its current position in the market, a description of its main products and advertising, and a basic analysis of its financial situation.

Part of the business aspect taught through these projects is learning how to be self reliant, how to research information on their own, be it at the library or talking to people within or

outside of the university, which often seems new and disorienting to them. Another part is to work in groups, learning to share and delegate. These skills are not taught per se, but the students have to come to a certain understanding of them to complete their projects successfully.

As opposed to the business projects in one's native tongue, there are obstacles when the "project" approach is used abroad: for one, the distance -- inability to meet with French executives, or even contact them by phone, given the cost, limited mail correspondence when you only have 10 or 15 weeks for the course; the discrepancy of the students levels (both business-wise and language-wise); and obviously the much larger amount of material to teach, in comparison with teaching native students who are already immersed in the culture of the country. Yet, I find the projects bring a sense of purpose to the classroom and the students definitely learn much more through them than they would through a mere textbook, and I will continue to use and refine the "project" approach.

Conclusions/Suggestions/Questions:

(1) Cross-training of faculty; constant up-dating of the knowledge of a changing business world (e.g., the EEC), including regular collection of materials while abroad: brochures, flyers, advertisements, but also exercise books (accounting, finance)...

(2) What to teach in a limited time frame? A possible solution

could be to vary the content of the course on a rotating basis: alternating courses with an emphasis on marketing, on accounting, on finance, on personnel management, etc.

(3) How to improve the students perception, while the language students feel ill-prepared for the business part, and the business students feel that they are penalized by their inferior linguistic level? And how to convey to students that the "project" approach will result in a certain departure from a straight-forward and heavily structured agenda, and will require creativity, experimenting and constant adjustments on their part?

Example of content taught: what to do with an end-of-year report?

To finish, I would like to give a practical example of teaching basic financial analysis skills in a French Business course, so that the students may use the annual report they receive from French companies to make intelligent conclusions. Here is a first step in the understanding of financial statements (by the end of the course, the students should be able to calculate some financial ratios to make educated conclusions and recommendations about the firm they are studying):

The French balance sheet (Bilan)

The "Actif" details the way in which funds are used, including materials, physical or abstract goods and rights owned by the firm, while the "Passif" describes the origin of the funds.

Bilan au....			
Actif immobilisé . immob. incorporelles . immob. corporelles . immob. financières		Capitaux propres . capital . réserves . résultat	
Total 1		Total 3	
Actif circulant . stocks de matières . stocks de produits finis . clients . autres débiteurs . banque . caisse		Dettes . emprunts . fournisseurs . autres créditeurs	
Total 2		Total 4	
Total actif	=	Total passif	

The balance sheet is a "picture" of the firm at a given time. On a daily basis, any operation will modify a certain number of components of this picture. The balance sheet being always "balanced", each transaction affecting one category will be counterbalanced by another operation, of equal value but in the opposite direction in another category of the balance sheet.

Exercise:

1. The firm ABC asks you to establish its balance sheet and determine its net worth ("capitaux propres") based on the following information (in thousands of Francs).

Suppliers: 500, Banks : 200, Financial debts: 500

Inventories: 100, Material and Equipment: 600

Building: 1000, Fiscal debts: 500, Clients: 100

2. How will the balance sheet change after each of the following transactions?

1. Purchase of equipment for 100, cash
2. Purchase of equipment for 100, credit
3. Purchase of merchandises for 30, cash
4. Purchase of merchandises for 30, 60 days credit
5. Received a bank loan for 500
6. Sale for 100 (inventory bought at 50), cash
7. Sale for 50 (inventory bought at 25), 60 days credit
8. Paid off a loan of 100
9. Main shareholder brought in 100
10. Client paid off 50
11. A supplier accepted to consolidate a debt in the amount of 100 into a medium-to-long-term loan.

After the students understand the balance sheet and how it changes, we move on to the "compte de résultat", and finally to financial ratios.